## PRESS RELEASE

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Northwest Straits Commission's Derelict Fishing Gear Team Receives National Coastal America Award

Timothy R. E. Keeney, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, will present the award at a ceremony on September 15, 2003, held in conjunction with the Estuarine Research Federation's 17th Biennial Conference in Seattle, Washington. Mr. Keeney and the recipients will be joined by representatives of the Coastal America partnership including Director Virginia K. Tippie.

Each award recipient will receive a letter of congratulations from President Bush stating "The partnership you forged has brought together Federal, State, Tribal, local agencies, and organizations to develop a comprehensive plan to begin a massive undertaking to remove derelict fishing gear from Puget Sound. Through your efforts, the habitats in Northern Puget Sound are safer for people, marine mammals, fish and sea birds. My Administration strongly supports such efforts to bring together collective resources to meet common goals and better our environment."

To recognize outstanding partnership efforts, Coastal America established a national awards program in 1997. Nine projects were selected to receive the 2003 award.

Over the last century, Puget Sound has accumulated hundreds of tons of lost and abandoned fishing gear (primarily commercial fishing nets and crab and shrimp traps). Many of these continue to kill marine life unabated. Because of the damage derelict fishing gear inflicts on marine habitat, wildlife and people, the Northwest Straits Commission sponsored a project to begin a comprehensive removal effort, in partnership with other organizations and agencies. In 2002, during the first-year pilot project, derelict fishing gear was surveyed, located, photographed, mapped and removed from the marine environment of Northern Puget Sound. Operational guidelines and safety protocols were developed, tested and adopted; licensed and certified divers became experienced at actual gear removals; and additional knowledge was gained about the level of substrate -and biotic- damage inflicted by gear in temperate waters. Community meetings were held, and a reporting hotline, web site and database were established. This organized, successful location and recovery project was the first comprehensive effort ever undertaken in the rich waters and marine habitats of Puget Sound, and the team plans to continue and enlarge its scope. Besides the Northwest Straits Commission, team members included: the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service, Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Washington State Departments of Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources, and Ecology, Puget Sound Action Team, Washington Sea Grant Program, Tulalip Tribes, Natural Resources Consultants and several Marine Resources Committees.

"There are literally hundreds of tons of derelict fishing gear in Puget Sound," said project leader Tom Cowan. "It's wonderful to finally begin a comprehensive project to remove this gear that continues to needlessly kill fish, shellfish, marine birds and mammals. We appreciate the extra spotlight that comes with receiving this important award."

The Coastal America Partnership was established in 1992 to protect, preserve and restore our coastal watersheds by integrating federal actions with state and local government and non-governmental efforts. The federal partners include the Departments of Agriculture, Air Force, Army, Commerce, Defense, Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Navy, State, Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Executive Office of the President. Through multi-agency teams, the partnership process enables national policy issues to be identified and resolved, regional plans and strategies to be developed, and local projects to be implemented.

The Northwest Straits Initiative was authorized by Congress in 1998 to support a citizen-driven, "bottom-up" approach to protecting and restoring the vital marine resources of northern Puget Sound and the Straits of Juan de Fuca. All seven eligible counties have joined the Initiative and formed Marine Resources Committees (MRCs) to set priorities, sponsor restoration projects, and make recommendations to local, state, and federal governments on methods needed for long-term protection. The Northwest Straits Commission is composed of MRC representatives, governor appointees, and a Secretary of the Interior Tribal appointee. The Commission supports the local MRCs, and undertakes projects of regional significance such as this derelict fishing gear removal effort.

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Notes: The Coastal America award will be presented to the Derelict Fishing Gear Project Team during the morning opening session of the Estuarine Research Federation conference on Monday, September 15 between 9:00am-12:00pm.

List of Awardees:

US Senator Patty Murray

US Congressman Rick Larsen

US Congressman Norm Dicks

Washington State Senator Bob Oke

Tom Cowan, Northwest Straits Commission

Gary Wood, Northwest Straits Commission

Buck Meloy, Northwest Straits Commission

Joe Schmitt, Northwest Straits Commission

Sasha Horst, Northwest Straits Commission

Jeff Koenings, WA Department of Fish & Wildlife

Mary Lou Mills, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife

Tim Smith, WA Department of Fish & Wildlife

NOAA Community-based Restoration Program

Dave Dinsmore, Director, NOAA Diving Program

Jeff June, Natural Resources Consultants, Inc.
Terry Stevens, Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve
Doug Sutherland, Commissioner of Public Lands
Doug Williams, WA Department of Natural Resources
Duane Fagergren, Puget Sound Action Team
Andrea Copping, Washington Sea Grant Program
Daryl Williams, Tulalip Tribes
Gordon White, WA Department of Ecology